

Status as Performance in Roman Society¹

How should we approach the study of Roman society? The traditional approach has been to focus on the different groups identified by the Romans themselves as making up their political community, defined either in legal or political terms or more informally (e.g. the army and the poor). This focus on (in anthropological terms) ‘agents’ concepts’ – which inevitably limits our perspective to that of the dominant, literate elite who produce the bulk of our sources – raises the question of what sort of groups these are in modern sociological terms. In scholarship over the last few decades this has tended to be reduced to a choice between status and class, since other modern definitions of social groups based on income or form of labour are clearly anachronistic. The long-running debates about both these terms has led many recent studies to side-step the issue, by focusing on a binary division between ‘elite’ and ‘non-elite’ (conflating wealth and power, and free and unfree, in a manner which neither reflects ancient categories of thought nor offers any significant analytical advantage from a modern perspective) or side-stepping the issue altogether by concentrating on the nature of social relations.² This has produced some exciting and insightful accounts of the dynamics of Roman social interactions, but it leaves a whole other set of questions open: what were the key groups that made up Roman society, and hence shaped individuals’ behaviour and relations with one another?

1. Status and its Critics

‘Status’, along with ‘class’, has been a central concept in modern social analysis, which has at least partially influenced the study of ancient society.³ From this perspective, society is understood not (or not only) in material terms, with the different groups that constitute it defined through their relations to the means of production (most obviously, wage labourers versus capitalists within modernity). It is rather interpreted in terms of the ideas, beliefs and attitudes that shape social behaviour and interaction, so that social groups are defined by the level of social esteem they command. The classic formulation of the status approach remains that offered by Max Weber:

‘Status’ shall mean an effective claim to social esteem in terms of positive or negative privileges; it is typically found on a) style of life, hence b) formal education, which may be α) empirical training or β) rational instruction, and the corresponding forms of behaviour, c)

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² See e.g. Peachin ed. 2011; Toner 2015.

³ Introduction and discussion in Turner 1988 and Crompton 1998; briefer surveys in e.g. Bilton et al. 2002: 70-94 and Macionis & Plummer 2002: 178-201.

hereditary or occupational prestige. In practice, status expresses itself through α) connubium, β) commensality, possibly γ) monopolistic appropriation of privileged modes of acquisition or the abhorrence of certain kinds of acquisition, δ) status conventions (traditions) of other kinds. Status *may* rest on class position of a distinct or an ambiguous kind. However, it is not solely determined by it: money and an entrepreneurial position are not in themselves status qualifications, although they may lead to them; and the lack of property is not in itself a status disqualification, although this may be a reason for it. Conversely, status may influence, if not completely determine, a class position without being identical with it.⁴

Weber focuses on the importance of *Ehre* – often translated as ‘honour’, but ‘prestige’ or ‘social esteem’ may be preferred, as being more obviously relevant to all levels of society rather than just the aristocracy – as an organising principle of society. He thus insists on the social significance of a wide range of different practices and conventions, from legal privileges and hereditary office-holding to dress, eating habits and shared cultural references, which might otherwise be regarded as trivial in comparison to the fundamental importance of wealth or formal political power, but all of which may influence an individual’s social esteem. These practices are not merely reflections or expressions of a social hierarchy defined by other factors, but actively work to establish and maintain it. Further, Weber’s analysis argues that these various practices and conventions converge into a single system of social differentiation, so that different claims to prestige tend to be associated with and to reinforce one another, while at the same time none of them is sufficient, in isolation, to establish the status of an individual beyond dispute.

To take a familiar ancient example, the tradition espoused by Roman writers like Cato and Cicero that trade is a vulgar occupation (compare Weber’s ‘abhorrence of certain kinds of acquisition’) was not in itself a marker, let alone a source, of social esteem in Republican Rome; but it was part of a complex of conventions, attitudes and privileges that worked to differentiate what we might for the moment call ‘the elite’ from the rest of Roman society.⁵ Members of that elite were generally well-born (preferably of noble Roman lineage, but certain kinds of outsiders might be admitted in small numbers; slaves and former slaves, however, were excluded), wealthy (but only if the wealth had been acquired in an acceptable manner) and educated (sharing a store of cultural references and attitudes). Legally they were classed as *honestiores* (but the scope of that label was never clearly defined, and can indeed be seen as deliberately vague); politically they were members of the highest census class; but neither of these formal criteria was wholly

⁴ Weber 1968: 305-6; cf. 932.

⁵ Cato *De Agr.* preface 1-4; Cicero *Off.* 1.151.

sufficient to establish their status beyond reasonable doubt.⁶ Just as important were their style of life and their regular activities, where they were marked out as much by what they did not do as by what they did (leisure rather than manual labour, frugality – of a certain kind – rather than excess). In brief, these men were the *boni*, morally and materially superior to the rest of the population, with a level of honour and esteem that served to legitimise their group's monopoly on political, military and religious office-holding.⁷ The interaction and mutual dependence of all these different claims to honour and power are encapsulated by Tacitus' remark on the existence of a property qualification for senators and equestrians: 'just as they enjoy precedence in place, rank and dignity, so they should enjoy it also in those things that make for mental peace and physical well-being'.⁸ Conversely, aspirant members of the elite were judged by their literary and cultural credentials and the way that they hosted dinner parties at least as much as by any practical, political or legal criteria.⁹ The Athenian *kaloï kagathoi*, and other nobilities across the ancient Mediterranean, constituted status groups of a similar kind, differing from one another only trivially, with variations in the particular sources of social esteem that buttressed their position and in the extent to which they were able to convert their social standing into other sorts of power.¹⁰

This approach to social analysis has been particularly favoured by ancient historians over the last forty years, not as a complement to class-based analysis, as Weber intended his theory to be, but as an alternative to it.¹¹ 'Class' has been rejected by the majority of historians, especially in the anglophone tradition as anachronistic, reductionist, excessively economic and unhelpfully politicised – in brief, tainted by its origins in Marxist theory.¹² 'Status', on the other hand, appears much more sensitive to historical difference; a focus on prestige is assumed to be common to all human societies, but that allows wide variation in the means by which social esteem is acquired and expressed in different contexts. Further, the Weberian approach seems, as Weber intended, to resemble much more closely the ways that Greeks and Romans themselves thought about their own societies – there is little evidence of 'class consciousness' in any

⁶ On the *honestiores/humiliores* distinction, see Rilinger 1988.

⁷ Beard & Crawford 1999: 12-47; Garnsey & Saller 2014: 132-47.

⁸ *Annals* 2.33.5.

⁹ Habinek 1998; Edwards 1993; Veyne 1961.

¹⁰ See generally Morley 2004: 76-80; 2006: 304-7 on Rome.

¹¹ See above all Finley 1999: 35-61 for the explicit preference of status over class; later work, e.g. Garnsey & Saller 2014, Meachin 2011, Ando 2015 has tended to take a Weberian approach more or less for granted; Kuhn 2015 explores the idea of 'prestige' in multiple aspects.

¹² Cf. Harris 2011 and Rose 2012, attempting to rehabilitate the concept.

meaningful sense in antiquity, but ‘status consciousness’ appears almost an obsession. Moreover, status-based approaches are seen as preferable because they encompass and value a wider range of human behaviour, rather than (supposedly) relegating most social and cultural activity to epiphenomena of economic structures. They place more emphasis on human agency and consciousness, whether in the construction of institutions (such as a legal system that enshrines and reinforces status differentiation) or in the behaviour of individuals negotiating the social system; class analysis, in contrast, emphasises the role of impersonal structures (above all, economic structures) in determining human actions without the actors being aware of this.

In part, then, ancient historians’ preference for status-based social analysis clearly reflects a preference for historical-humanistic approaches over social-scientific ones, and for actors’ concepts and categories over modern observers’ ones.¹³ It may also be attributed partly to the ways in which the two ideas were originally presented. Whereas Marx’s uses of the term ‘class’ were expressly present-focused, and he derived (but never properly developed) a general social theory from his analysis of the social conflicts of his own day, Weber moved in the opposite direction, drawing general conclusions from a wide range of historical material and discovering the persistence of older forms of social behaviour (such as ‘honour’, and the importance of the guild) even in modern society.¹⁴ Further, Weber tied his analysis to a set of assumptions about the relative underdevelopment of the economy and limited significance of the market in pre-modern societies – ‘one might thus say that classes are stratified according to their relations to the production and acquisition of goods; whereas status groups are stratified according to the principles of their *consumption* of goods as represented by special styles of life’¹⁵ – in a way that dovetails neatly with the substantivist tradition in ancient economic history.¹⁶

The idea that ancient societies are best understood in terms of status groups, defined partly by birth, partly in legal terms (free versus slave, *honestiores* versus *humiliores*), partly politically

¹³ Cf. Morris 2002.

¹⁴ Marx’s theory has regularly been misread, e.g. by Finley, as implying that there must have been a *bourgeoisie* and a proletariat in antiquity, and then rejected on the grounds that this idea is patently absurd; Marx said no such thing, but it is certainly true that he made none of the gestures towards historical difference that Weber did. See generally on class Wood 1995: 76-107; on Weber’s historical sociology, Love 1991 and McCarthy 2003.

¹⁵ Weber 1968: 937.

¹⁶ Exemplified by Finley 1999. Of course, much contemporary research in ancient economic history more or less explicitly repudiates the primitivist/substantivist approach in favour of New Institutional Economics – see most of the chapters in Scheidel, Morris & Saller 2007 – but that same intellectual move leads them to separate economic from social analysis, rather than insisting on the embedding of economy in society, and hence to ignore questions of social history. Historians focusing on ancient society are more likely to have remained substantivist in their inclinations, even if this is not explicitly articulated as a theoretical position.

(citizen versus alien, different census groups) and partly by a plethora of status markers, practices and traditions, has proved influential and – to the extent that it has helped explain the level of concern which ancient writers expressed about apparently trivial and non-political behaviour such as eating habits and clothing – useful.¹⁷ However, the concept has been subjected to a range of criticisms. These have come above all from those who continue to prefer ‘class’ as a term of analysis, and this frequently reflects their belief in the primacy of material factors, a preference for observers’ social-scientific categories over ancient actors’ modes of thought, and a suspicion of approaches that claim to be ideologically neutral (in other words, a disagreement over fundamental assumptions and political agendas).¹⁸ However, when a non-Marxist social analyst of the stature of Michael Mann refers to status as ‘that most vacuous of sociological terms’, it is reasonable to conclude there must be some serious questions about the usefulness of the concept.¹⁹ Four major objections have been raised.

(i) Elitism. Status analysis, insofar as it echoes the categories and assumptions of the literary sources, tends to take at face value the self-presentation and values of a specific social group, namely the elite, rather than society as a whole, and generalises this to the rest of society. It is clear enough that Greek and Roman elites, and elites in other historical contexts, conceived of their society in terms of a hierarchy of social prestige, with themselves at the apex, and assumed that their own value judgements had universal validity. It is less clear that all societies, especially pre-modern societies, are actually so homogeneous in either their regard for honour or their criteria for ascribing it.²⁰ The idea, for example, that trade was regarded as a shameful activity by all levels of Roman society, so that all Romans either avoided it (with significant consequences for economic development) or, if they couldn’t afford to, felt themselves socially inferior as a result, is unsupported by any evidence, and seems to be contradicted by the willingness of members of the ‘lower orders’ to advertise their trading activities in their epitaphs.²¹ Clearly there is scope for considering (under the heading of ‘ideology’) the means whereby and the extent to which the ideas of dominant social groups become established and taken-for-granted through

¹⁷ E.g. Edwards 1993.

¹⁸ ‘Whereas descriptions of ancient society in terms of some category other than class – status, for instance – are perfectly innocuous... an analysis of Greek and Roman society in terms of class, in the specifically Marxist sense, is indeed something *threatening*’: de Ste Croix 1981: 45.

¹⁹ Mann 1986: 222.

²⁰ Toner 2015’s discussion of non-elite social relations identifies the role of sexual bragging and banter in social competition and cohesion among the lower orders; it clearly implies a concern for respect (another possible translation for *Ehre*), but in a radically different form from that found among the elite.

²¹ Joshel 1992.

society as a whole – but that is a question that needs to be explored, rather than accepted without argument. The nature of the surviving evidence from classical antiquity is such that we simply cannot judge how far the traditional understanding of ‘status’ and the status markers employed by Greek and Roman elites offer a means of understanding ancient society as a total system, rather than just revealing the obsessions and self-regulatory behaviour of a particular social group; at the least, we cannot build a model of the Greek or Roman social system based solely on the self-interested presentation of it offered by elite literary sources.

(ii) Individualism. Although status analysis often begins by identifying social groups, these are generally seen as the (static) background setting for individual social activity, which becomes the main focus of study. Much modern discussion of status considers it as a subjective social-psychological category, concentrating on issues such as social identity, status anxiety and status consistency.²² When status is considered rather as an objective position within the social order, occupation of which governs access to rights and privileges, most studies concentrate on individuals’ attempts at moving between or within existing status groups, and the extent to which the social system can be seen as closed or open to individual social mobility. There is little emphasis on status groups in their own right, if not as agents motivated by common goals (status analysis tends to resist such reification) then as structures that shape action in significant ways; all too often, status is seen as an individual attribute rather than as something that could provide a basis for collective action or conflict between groups. Ancient history in fact has a relatively good track record in this regard, if only as a result of the importance of the struggles between elite and *demos* in classical Greece or between the Roman orders, struggles where the contenders can be better understood, if only by default, as status groups rather than as classes or parties.

(iii) Stasis. This term is used not in the Greek political sense, relating to divisions within the state, but in the sense of the assumption of stability and the absence of change. Status analysis tends to take for granted the existence of relatively clearly defined status groups arranged in a hierarchy, with relatively well-known criteria for membership, which individual social actors then navigate. It does not offer a well-defined model for how these criteria or the nature of the social hierarchy might change over time. This is in clear contrast to class analysis, where classes are defined in relation to one another, so that changes within one class, or changes in external conditions, will inevitably lead to a reordering of the social system. Class analysis thus tends to focus on the analysis of changing social relationships over time, of the ongoing struggle between classes. Status analysis tends rather to be synchronic, describing the social system at a given point in

²² And cf. Bodel 2015 on ‘status dissonance’ within the Roman equestrian order.

time, as the background against which individual actors live their lives. Where a 'social history' is offered at all, rather than just a static description, the narrative tends to give the impression of a sort of punctuated equilibrium (to borrow a phrase from evolutionary biology), organised around a series of descriptions of the social system at different points over the course of centuries, with little indication of what happened in between these points or what was driving change.²³

(iv) Consensus. These three problematic tendencies tend to converge in a fourth, namely the assumption of a consensual model of past social structure. Society is conceived as a system made up of a number of constituent parts (e.g. status groups), within which individuals live their lives, sometimes remaining within the group into which they were born and sometimes rising or falling in the social hierarchy, whether through chance or their own efforts and errors. This individual activity may involve fierce competition and even conflict with other individuals, but the social structure as a whole is understood in terms of harmony, or at least stability and the absence of collective antagonism. In direct contrast to a class-based model of society where co-operation (based on common interests within social groups) and conflict (between groups with divergent interests) are taken for granted, analysis of the social structure in terms of status tends to assume the existence of an integrated system where both co-operation and conflict exist only at the lowest level and in clearly defined spheres of activity.

It is important to note that the majority of these criticisms are not intrinsic to the use of 'status' as an analytical term, but rather are related to the way in which the concept has been employed by one particular, albeit influential, sociological tradition, that of 'structural-functionalism', associated with Herbert Spencer and Talcott Parsons.²⁴ An alternative tradition, which equally traces its roots back to Weber's ideas, has no difficulty in adopting a conflict model of society, focusing on different aspects of the struggle over the allocation of scarce resources, above all power. In Mann's *The Sources of Social Power*, different forms of social stratification or division reflect the overall distribution of power within society: as classes are defined in relation to sources of economic power, so status groups are defined in relation to ideological power, the ability to establish meaning and norms for society as a whole, associated

²³ The classic example of a 'punctuated equilibrium' account is Alföldy 1985. Most ancient social histories based on status fail to offer any sort of account of development, generally by defining their chronological boundaries more narrowly. It should be noted that class analysis can also give an impression of 'punctuated equilibrium' in the long term, presenting historical development as a series of stages in which one 'mode of production' or 'social formation' is succeeded by another; but there is a greater sense of dynamism within any given stage, and the transition from one mode of production to another is narrated as the product of the internal dynamics of that society.

²⁴ Turner 1988: 8-13; Holmwood 2005.

with a dominant position in cultural and/or ritual activity.²⁵ Different forms of power are potentially exchangeable for one another: economic and ideological power can be employed as a means to gain political power, political power can represent a source of status and economic advantage, and so forth. Thus status is about far more than just an individual's subjective identity or position within a hierarchy of prestige as an end in itself; the possession of a certain status offers tangible benefits. Status thus offers a real basis for social co-operation and a real source of conflict; hence, groups which are established on the basis of different claims to status have a real existence and the potential to play a significant role in shaping events. Understanding status within this interpretative framework addresses a number of the standard criticisms: it is objective rather than subjective, not simply accepting ancient actors' own accounts of their society; it is not solely individualistic, but places at least as much emphasis on the interactions within status groups and the relations between them; it does not merely offer a description of the different groups within society and the ways in which they distinguish themselves from one another, but constitutes a means of analysing the nature of conflicts between them, and hence of understanding the course of events.

2. Status as Performance

Nevertheless, some problems remain with the concept; they are not necessarily arguments against adopting it, but certainly represent issues that need to be addressed if it is to be deployed successfully. The first is how to deal with the fact that the broad term 'status' encompasses so many forms of social differentiation: 'ascribed' and 'achieved' status (that is, status assigned by others, such as that related to family background, gender or ethnicity, versus status that is acquired as the result of an individual's choices and actions), status as different sorts of politico-legal entitlement (in an ancient context, for example, freedom versus slavery, or different degrees of political rights such as the distinction between citizenship *optimo iure* or *non optimo iure* or Latin status, or the *honestiores/humiliores* divide) and status as lifestyle. These different status markers are clearly powerful when they converge and reinforce one another in identifying an individual as a member of one of a small number of broad social groups that together constitute society, a phenomenon known as 'status coherence' or 'status crystallization'; part of the power of Weber's model is the way that it captures the mutual reinforcement of good birth, education, accent, clothing, lifestyle and attitudes in defining a social elite. Often, however, there are questions of the relative importance of different and incompatible status markers, whether for determining the status of an individual or for defining a group; compared with the analytical clarity of 'class',

²⁵ Mann 1986. Cf. the discussions in Hall & Schroeder 2006.

this can seem messy and confused, and there remains a lingering uncertainty as to whether the messiness is inherent in social reality or in the ambiguity of the concept.²⁶

Secondly, there is the question of how status actually ‘works’ in different situations, especially in situations that are not governed and limited by formal rules; for example, a social occasion, rather than a law-court seeking to establish an individual’s legal status and hence appropriate treatment or punishment.²⁷ Still more important is the question of how the status of a group actually translates into any sort of meaningful power; in other words, how ‘ideological power’ operates in practice. Thirdly, there is a continuing danger that the use of the term ‘status’ tends to produce a static picture of society, with a small number of more or less fixed groups (whose membership is regulated by well-established, clear and unchanging rules) vying with one another for power, with individuals seeking to move upwards from one group to the next. Once again, status analysis works most easily and effectively with groups that were legally defined, such as the Roman *classis*, so that moments of significant change in the criteria for membership or the rewards thereof are clearly visible. It is harder to chart the complexities of less formal status criteria, and so tempting to assume either a single, unchanging set of rules for elite behaviour, or to come to the conclusion that there are not really any rules at all (as seems to be suggested by Catharine Edwards’ analysis of the Roman discourse on luxury as a means of policing elite membership and behaviour).²⁸

The potential of thinking about status in terms of *performance* is that the metaphor seems to respond directly to these concerns. This approach has strong echoes of the concept of the ‘performativity of gender’ closely associated with the work of Judith Butler, emphasising the way that individuals develop a sense of their own identity and present this to others in relation to pre-existing norms and expectations, such that gender can be seen as an impersonation:

The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again.²⁹

²⁶ Though it has to be admitted that the ‘clarity’ of class can be largely an illusion; in the absence of an authoritative definition from Marx himself, we can choose from a range of different interpretations, each claiming to be what Marx *really* meant... Cf. Wood 1995.

²⁷ Garnsey 1970 remains key on this latter topic.

²⁸ Edwards 1993.

²⁹ Butler 1988: 526. On the history of ‘performativity’ as a concept, often used in a very different sense from Butler, see Loxley 2007.

Still more, it draws on the ideas of Erving Goffman in his 1951 classic *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, which understands everyday behaviour in terms of the influence of pre-defined social roles.³⁰

A focus on performance as the key specifically to status emphasises the diversity and ambiguity of forms of social differentiation, and seeks to identify an underlying coherence by focusing not on the rules or criteria of differentiation but on process. Status, it can be argued, is a constant process of *becoming*, seeking to look the part and to be accepted in that role, rather than a state of *being*. It is concerned less with winning esteem or honour in a narrow sense than with gaining recognition and acceptance by others, which then provide a basis for ongoing social relationships and the constitution of social groups (of which more below). The complexity of social life, even in the least differentiated forms of society, lies in the fact that every social actor is constantly performing and at the same time judging the performances of others, but for the sake of clarity we should begin with the parameters of a single relationship between an individual social actor and their audience, taking as a core example the familiar figure of the Roman *new man*.³¹ We can identify a series of eight overlapping principles:

1. Individuals play multiple roles in the course of their lives. The choice of role at any given moment may depend on their personal circumstances, on their aims and motives, or on the situations in which they find themselves and their interpretations of those situations. No role is quite alike, but in any given society there will be a limited number of basic social types, which offer both a template for performance and a set of limiting expectations. A new arrival in Rome, seeking to gain acceptance by members of the established elite as the foundation of a political career, would have needed above all to play the role of an aspiring member of that elite, conforming to their expectations of behaviour and attitude while showing suitable deference; in different circumstances, however, he would also have had to play the roles of a man, a free man, a Roman, a dutiful son, a husband, a father, a member of the municipal aristocracy and so forth. The last point highlights the need for changing roles: the behaviour appropriate to a local Italian notable might be significantly different from that expected of a proper Roman aristocrat in Rome, not least in the requirement to play down one's local affiliations and habits (and even accent). Some of these roles may be easier to play convincingly or more leniently judged than others, but none is wholly free from external constraints and expectations.

³⁰ Goffman 1951, discussed by Jacobsen & Kristiansen 2016,

³¹ See Wiseman 1971, Dugan 2005, van der Blom 2017.

2. Individuals perform their roles to multiple and diverse audiences. Sometimes this is clearly defined and obvious: one might behave differently in the presence of family members, for example, but equally the aspiring Roman aristocrat would generally have acted differently towards his equals and inferiors in his home town, playing the established notable, than towards the members of the Roman elite by whom he hoped in future to be recognised as an equal. However, given the extent to which Roman culture seems to have regarded all behaviour, even the most private, as politically relevant, these distinctions may not have been easy to draw – a performance appropriate to its actual audience might nevertheless be reported to another group and perceived negatively. Further, there would have been plenty of occasions where the audience was mixed, such as a *contio* where a Roman notable performed to both his peers and his social inferiors. Potentially, a single performance could gain the acceptance of multiple audiences, or at least of a majority of them, but it is always possible that a performance appealing to the ordinary citizens might be perceived by many aristocrats as lapse from appropriate elite behaviour, and vice versa.³²

3. Individuals perform their roles in different venues, with different expectations of appropriate behaviour. The differences may be subtle, but clearly a Roman notable was judged on his performance in context, according to ideas about how one should behave at a dinner party, a sacrifice, a public meeting and so forth. A classic example is found in Cicero's denunciation of Antony for vomiting in front of an assembly of the Roman people (*Phil.* 2.63); of course Antony's behaviour is presented as something unacceptable in any context, but Cicero suggests that it would be disgraceful for a master of horse even to belch in such a situation, whereas clearly that would not be wholly unacceptable in private.

4. The individual's success depends on the reception of the performance by the audience. Put another way, neither the intentions nor the skill of the performer are sufficient to guarantee recognition, but at the same time a bravura performance might be able to outweigh obvious deficiencies in an individual's claims to acceptance.

5. The success of a performance always rests on a combination of elements rather than on a single aspect – indeed, it may rest precisely on the way in which different elements are balanced and combined, whereas a performance that depends too heavily on a single aspect, however persuasive (wealth, perhaps, or good birth) might be judged inferior precisely because it lacks roundedness. These elements will always be a mixture of the formal and informal, the weighty

³² On elite performances in *contiones* and similar public occasions, Mouritsen 2001 and Morstein-Marx 2004.

and the apparently trivial.³³ An aspiring Roman notable would generally have needed wealth and connections as a prerequisite for his case for recognition being heard at all – and free birth and citizenship were such basic qualifications that they need no discussion – but his performance would equally have been judged on his dress, his deportment, the attitudes he expresses, his ability to recognise literary allusion and so forth.

6. There are no fixed rules for judging or predicting the success of a performance; indeed, we can imagine that much of the process of judgement in the minds of the audience is unconscious or semi-conscious, a matter of whether they instinctively recognise the claims of the performer rather than whether they decide to recognise them.³⁴ A satisfactory performance is one that meets a sufficient number of the expectations of the particular audience, such that some flaws can be excused or overlooked (for example, provincial origins or limited connections, if the aspirant otherwise came across as ‘one of us’). Equally, an otherwise satisfactory performance might be wholly undermined by a single jarring element, just as Trimalchio’s attempts at gaining status by displaying his wealth in the traditional manner are shown to be constantly sabotaged by his lack of taste and restraint.

7. Performances are not judged in absolute terms as either acceptable or not acceptable, but always on a spectrum; further, those judgements are not set in stone but are always provisional, subject to modification in the light of subsequent performances (while also influencing the reception of those subsequent performances). Thus, even when a first performance has won recognition for an individual, that performance has to be repeated again and again; the aspiring Roman notable faced not a one-off examination of his claims to status but an on-going process of gaining and retaining acceptance, establishing shared values through a succession of conversations, establishing a common lifestyle through his behaviour at social functions, behaving on every occasion in the way that was appropriate and expected. We might imagine that the performance sometimes becomes easier over time, as the performer is known to his audience in that role and comes to be accepted more or less automatically in it – and as the

³³ In China Miéville’s novel *The City and the City* (2009), social life in the co-located cities of Besź and Ul Qoma depends on the inhabitants’ ability to recognise their fellow-citizens – ‘The early years of a Besź (and presumably an Ul Qoman) child are intense learnings of cues. We pick up styles of clothing, permissible colours, ways of walking and holding oneself, very fast’ – and to ‘unsee’ those belonging to the other city.

³⁴ Miéville offers a negative example, as one character – an outsider – has observed ‘those million unnoticed mannerisms that marked out civic specificity’ so closely that he could avoid commitment to either, and so is instinctively unseen by everyone he encounters. Conversely, in the modern era, the wearing of a uniform and a sufficiently confident manner can, at least in the short term, be sufficient to command instinctive recognition and hence obedience; compare the case of the Hauptmann von Köpenick in Prussia in 1906.

habits of performance become increasingly ingrained and instinctive (those born into the elite are generally schooled in them from an early age). Indeed, individuals who are well established in their social position can survive the occasional poor performance without any long-term consequences, especially if they are in a position to exchange other sorts of power (military, economic) for status (Cicero's attacks on Antony's department, for example, were unsuccessful in undermining his standing to any appreciable extent). However, all members of society are subject to the need to perform the appropriate roles continually, at the risk of losing the recognition that ensured membership of the status group or, at the highest levels, of losing the status that could be employed to gain political office and other forms of power.

8. The expectations and criteria that influence the judgement of performances change over time. This may be in direct or indirect response to external developments: increasing numbers of rich freedmen, for example, so that, for the elite, wealth ceases to be a sufficient basis for offering or withholding recognition and it becomes necessary to emphasise taste; or the growing power and ambition of newly-enfranchised Italians, so that it becomes necessary to establish cultural norms as a means of determining which of them can be accepted as proper members of the elite.

However, it can also be a result of the especially effective performances of individuals, which then change the conditions under which later performances are evaluated. For example, there is the way that the Gracchi expanded the repertoire for members of the traditional elite, showing that one might out to demonstrate one's commitment to the welfare of the masses in order to gain recognition (clearly such 'populism' is not a performance style intended primarily to appeal to the elite), or the way that Pompey, Caesar and others in the first century won applause from the population at large by ignoring the traditional values of restraint in favour of lavish display and euergetism. Individuals could continue to gain recognition and acceptance from the elite by offering more traditional performances, but those who wished to gain the mass recognition that could be exchanged for real power were compelled, one way or another, to accommodate themselves to these new styles of performance, and the legacy of this can clearly be seen in the next century in the expectations that become associated with the behaviour of emperors.³⁵

3. Status Groups and Ideological Power

These eight principles offer a template for interpreting the social behaviour of individuals in classical antiquity, and the way that this is discussed in our sources. We can see the role of performance, evaluation and recognition in the myriad trivial character traits, words and actions of the figures in Theophrastus' *Characters*, a manual on how one should perform the role of an

³⁵ Generally, Yavetz 1969; Veyne 1990.

Athenian citizen and judge the performances of others.³⁶ We can see the way that a Roman notable sought to present himself in a particular way to his social inferiors, in order both to gain material advantage in his future dealings with them and to enhance his social standing in general, in the younger Pliny's account of his treatment of a group of wine dealers to whom he had sold shares in his wine harvest.³⁷ Further, we can develop an understanding of the importance of achieving this status recognition for individuals, and the reasons why, especially in Rome, status was pursued so avidly, and anxiety about the loss of status (as in Juvenal's satires, for example) was so pervasive.

Partly because of the traditions of Roman historiography, discussions have tended to focus almost exclusively on the way status can be exchanged for political power, as acceptance into membership of the elite was a prerequisite for standing for a magistracy and a positive evaluation of one's performance as a potential leader by a significant proportion of the population was the basis for garnering votes.³⁸ Clearly this is an important element of Roman social relations, but it is not the full story. In Mann's sociological framework, the different sources of social power are much more on a level and interdependent, rather than political power having paramount status. His model has no difficulty in comprehending the choices made by the likes of Atticus or Maecenas in following alternative, non-political routes to power, offering different sorts of performances as members of the Roman elite, primarily or exclusively to elite audiences rather than to the mass of the population. Status recognition is a prerequisite for establishing friendships and kinship relations with one's (supposed) equals, and for social life in general. It also allows an individual in a hierarchical society to expect a certain degree of respect from those perceived and perceiving themselves to be of lower status, which would explain why freedmen and even slaves, with no possibility of pursuing political ambitions, nevertheless invested heavily in their own performances, through dinner parties, lifestyle, education and burial practices.

There remains the question of how far, if at all, understanding status as performance escapes the standard criticism that status analysis is unhelpfully individualistic, obscuring the extent to which society needs to be understood in terms of different social groups with competing or opposing interests. Put another way, how far, and how, did status constitute a basis for large-scale co-operation or conflict in Greece or Rome? Given Mann's emphasis on power, the obvious focus of enquiry is the elite that controlled most power in ancient society. Clearly the

³⁶ Millett 2007.

³⁷ *Ep.* 8.2.

³⁸ The *Commentariolum Petitionis* could certainly be read in these terms.

elite did not become fully institutionalised, in either Greece or Rome, with fixed membership lists or explicit criteria for acceptance; rather, these groups are best understood as networks, based on mutual recognition and shared standards, invariably fuzzy at the edges and containing within them any number of sub-groups (old versus new families, different groups based on kinship, friendship and interests).³⁹ There is no formal organisation or direction in such groups, but nevertheless it is possible to make meaningful statements about the ways that they function. In Rome, the elite as a social group regulated the access of individuals to political power and other resources, by determining through the ongoing processes of performance and judgement who was to be recognised as a member. In the same way it policed the behaviour of its members through the ever-present threat of withholding recognition and hence denying access to the benefits of being a member.

However, the elite can also be seen to have acted as a collective, in the collective interest; as a status group, significantly larger than the class of active politicians, it aimed to maintain its monopoly on political office and its role in the direction of the state, in opposition (not necessarily openly) to other, generally more amorphous groups of those who were excluded from direct political authority. This is the main function of ideological power, associated in Mann's schema with status: it works to create cohesion, consensus, and legitimation across society, above all to establish general acceptance of the right of the elite to continue to monopolise office and command obedience and respect. This both maintains the status quo in structural terms, and benefits individual members of the elite; any magistrate, or even ordinary aristocrat, can draw upon the ideological power of the elite as a whole, its inherited and constantly reinforced authority, provided that his performance as an aristocrat is adequate to convince his audience. This offers one answer to the problem identified by Wilfried Nippel, that the Romans apparently take it for granted that a magistrate with a few attendants should be perfectly capable of bringing angry crowd to order without any difficulty; the 'audience' of plebs has been taught to respond to a convincing performance of aristocratic authority with obedience.⁴⁰ At the same time, however, every individual performance reflects back on the collective; a bravado performance can reinforce the legitimacy of elite power, a catastrophic one can undermine the standing of all members of the elite. Individual behaviour thus needs to be policed not only as a means of controlling membership of the elite, but also to ensure its cohesion and maintain its claims to superiority in the face of competing ideologies of power.

³⁹ For a useful introduction to network theory in a modern context see Grewal 2008.

⁴⁰ Nippel 1995.

In this respect, it makes sense to talk of the collective performance of the elite in persuading the rest of society to recognise its claims to status and hence authority. This performance follows many of the same principles as those of individuals do. There are different roles (the elite as war leaders, as intermediaries in communication with the divine, as statesmen), performed in different contexts (what gets institutionalised in Rome is not the group itself but the venues and occasions for the performance of status: the senate, the forum, the theatre, the games and the battlefield). The success of the performance rests on the combination of many different elements rather than on a single aspect, it is not judged according to fixed rules, and the performance has to be repeated continually, by a succession of different magistrates; a single inadequate performance may not bring the elite as a whole into disrepute, but the cumulative effect may be catastrophic. Most importantly, the audience for the performance may change (most obviously, the expansion of the Roman citizenship in the late Republic), as may the expectations and criteria for evaluation of that audience. The failure of the elite to maintain its dominance in the late Republic was not universal, since there were politicians who recognised the need to appear to address the concerns of the masses, but sufficient numbers failed to meet these new expectations, without being corrected by the collective, for the group as a whole to lose legitimacy in the face of alternative claims to political power from a number of economically and militarily powerful individuals. The consequence was a reconfiguration not only of political and military power, with the establishment of the Principate, but also of the operations of status and ideological power, placing the traditional elite beneath the emperor and those who claimed status through the association with him.

This brief and speculative sketch offers some indication of the potential for considering status as performance, both at the individual and the collective level. It responds to most of the standard criticisms of status analysis insofar as it is neither static, nor unrealistically consensual, nor wholly individualistic. It does remain predominantly elitist in its focus, but it retains this perspective in recognition of the fact that the elite are in most societies those who wield the most power, especially political, military and ideological power; further, it recognises the extent to which that power must be earned and legitimised, precisely through the performance of status and its recognition by the mass audience.⁴¹ As noted at the beginning of this chapter, status will never be the only concept necessary for the analysis of ancient society, but must be considered alongside other forms of power and their respective forms of social organisation. However, it is a concept that perhaps offers the greatest potential for exploration at this time; not because it has been neglected, but because it has too readily been accepted as the obvious means of describing

⁴¹ There are obvious echoes here of Ober 1989.

ancient society, simply by virtue of not being 'class', without any proper consideration of how it actually worked.

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